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PANEL I

**Participation and access of women to the media,
and information and communication technologies
and their impact on and use as an instrument
for the advancement and empowerment of women**

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[English only]

UNITED NATIONS ICT TASK FORCE

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UNITED NATIONS INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES (ICT) TASK FORCE

www.unicttaskforce.org

I.   OVERVIEW

The United Nations Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Task Force is the result of a unique international collaboration. The Task Force, launched by the Secretary-General in November 2001, brings together representatives from governments, the private sector, non-profit organizations, and international organizations, representing both the developed and developing countries, in a cooperative effort to identify ways in which the digital revolution can benefit all the world's people, especially the poorest and most marginalized groups. This work is particularly relevant at a time when we are all more focused than ever before on the interdependence of our world.

The broader context for the work programme of the Task Force is provided by the Secretary-General's report "*Strengthening of the United Nations: An Agenda for Further Change*", aimed at aligning the United Nations programme of work with the Millennium Declaration, along with the outcomes of the International Conference on Financing for Development, the World Summit on Sustainable Development and other major conferences of the past decade. These major conferences and summits have outlined a comprehensive vision of what Member States seek to accomplish. Despite recent turbulence in the so-called "new economy", major advances in information and communications technologies (ICT), combined with the rapid growth of global networks, such as the Internet, have created new opportunities for the United Nations system for the realization of the global vision and of the international development goals and commitments.

In the brief period since its inauguration, the Task Force, through a rich and unprecedented mix of plenary meetings, informal consultations, meetings with stakeholders and, electronic outreach to broader audiences across the world, has launched a matrix of Working Groups and Regional Networks as platforms for the implementation of the overall Plan of Action. These Working Groups are already addressing a broad range of policy issues and have

launched several initiatives on their own in the areas of policy and governance, e-strategies, capacity building, resource mobilization, connectivity and access, and entrepreneurship. On the other hand, five Regional Networks have proven their effectiveness in compiling and sharing accumulated experiences, identifying region-specific goals and priorities and for supporting best practices.

2. THE SECOND PHASE: FUTURE STRATEGY AND WORK PROGRAMME

The Task Force is moving into an era of implementation. For the next two years, the Task Force is following a well-focused strategy and an organizational and governance structure to make the support of the realization of the Millennium Development Goals the paramount objective of its work. The role of the Task Force is to serve as a tool of the United Nations system and the global community at large in meeting the goals of the Millennium Declaration, including Millennium Development Goal 3 to promote gender equality and empower women. On a more practical level, the Task Force has set up a core group of members of the Task Force and other participants to act, under the leadership of Professor Calestous Juma of Harvard University, as Task Force 10 of the Millennium Project to avoid duplication and resources spread too thinly.

Another important mandate is to contribute effectively to the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) to be held in 2003 in Geneva and in 2005 in Tunis. The Task Force has offered its existing global matrix of Working Groups and Regional Networks as platforms for the preparatory process for the WSIS in ensuring a broad-based input, including from the private sector, foundations and NGOs. The Task Force, due to its character, composition and mandate, is well positioned to help sharpen the focus of the Summit, to define a vision and help develop an inclusive and universal approach to information society, with the achievement of United Nations Millennium Development Goals placed at the center.

Special focus of the Task Force work programme will be on Africa. New elements, especially the NEPAD initiative are encouraging platforms for future cooperation on ICT in Africa. It will be critical to more effectively integrate and align existing efforts and to harness synergies and increase cooperation between various actors at the national, regional and international level. The Task Force has agreed to serve as a strategic partner in the following three major areas:

- Supporting innovative ICT programmes and R&D in the field of ICT in Africa
- Harnessing synergies and linking the vast number of ICT initiatives both within Africa and between Africa and other continents
- Providing a framework for defining collaboration between NEPAD and the African Information Society Initiative

With regard to the United Nations system, the Task Force has been mandated to work with the CEB in developing a broader and long-term ICT strategy for the United Nations system that would include:

(a)   the system wide application and use of information and communication technologies to strengthen the United Nations capacity to create, share and disseminate knowledge and to help make the United Nations more efficient and effective in service delivery to Member States;

(b)   mainstreaming and integrating ICT more fully into development and technical cooperation activities of the organizations of the system;

(c)   building collaborative networks and communities of practice among organizations of the system;

(d)   developing, where appropriate, common platforms for services, such as databases, documentation and meetings;

(e)   encouraging the use of ICT to promote the exchange of experiences and to enhance information-sharing among the organizations of the system and between the organizations and Member States; and

(f)   developing comprehensive system wide training programmes aimed at building the capacities of the system to take full advantage of ICT.

3.   GENDER ASPECTS IN THE WORK OF THE UN ICT TASK FORCE

Plan of Action of the UN ICT Task Force:
The Task Force adopted, at its first meeting in November 2001, a Plan of Action as a framework for guidance of its work. The Plan of Action outlines the short-term actions to be taken and the medium-term objectives to be pursued and makes numerous references to the importance of promoting gender equality and empowering women in the context of ICT-for-development:

• The Task Force is pro-actively identifying opportunities for preventing, reducing and eliminating gender disparities in the ICT sector, and in access to and use of ICT-for-development.

• The Task Force provides a platform to analyse how programmes for promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women can be leveraged and enhanced with ICT. It provides global leadership for promoting a better balance between women and men in the ICT-for-development programmes and activities.

• While assisting countries in designing national and regional ICT strategies, the Task Force points out factors that restrict women's equal participation in the ICT sector, and identify policy interventions for overcoming constraints and for the promotion of gender equality.

• A key priority of the Task Force is to enhance human capacity development, knowledge creation and sharing, and, in that context, to harness ICT for education for all as well as on higher education and training, with particular attention to overcoming existing disparities in educational and training opportunities and achievements between girls/women and boys/men.

• An important objective of the Task Force is to foster enterprise and entrepreneurship for sustainable economic development including poverty alleviation. A key component of this objective is to foster female entrepreneurship and to generate livelihood opportunities for women, especially in rural areas of developing countries, through promoting technologically dynamic business models, products and services that rely on female entrepreneurship.

Global e-School Initiative

In a major groundbreaking effort to advance the MDGs with ICT, the governments of Ireland and Sweden, in early partnership with Intel and McKinsey, have presented to the Task Force a Global eSchool Initiative, following the GAVI model, that aims at wiring all schools in the world to function as ICT community hubs, including by scaling up existing initiatives such as the Education for All and NEPAD's e-school project and will help connect local communities, within developing regions, to the Internet by 2015, utilizing region wide educational/community infrastructure. The Task Force intends to launch its Global eSchool Initiative, in the first place, in Africa and will help scale up the Girls Education initiatives.

UNIFEM's Women Entrepreneur Diaspora Network together

The Task Force has established collaborative links with UNIFEM to help advance and scale up the UNIFEM's Women Entrepreneurs Diaspora Network and is working to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with UNIFEM to establish formal institutional framework.

Expert Group on Gender and ICT

The Task Force has contributed to the Expert Group on Gender and ICT with the objective to promote women's empowerment through ICT.

Digital Diaspora Network for Africa (DDN-A):

The Task Force has built a close working relationship with the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). The DDN-A has been launched by the Task Force, in collaboration with UNIFEM, UNFIP, Digital Partners Institute (Seattle, USA) and Gruppo Cerfe (Italy), to promote development in Africa with ICT applications through mobilizing the entrepreneurial, technological and professional expertise and resources of the African Diaspora. An important element in the work of the Network is to empower African women through the innovative use of ICT.

Task Force contribution to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS):

The Task Force has provided substantive input to the WSIS preparatory process in the form of a written contribution, which stresses the need to build gender equality into ICT-for-development policies and programmes.

4. OUR MISSION

The principles of operation of the Task Force are accountability, openness, transparency and trust. Other principles include collaborative partnership, multi-stakeholder participation, efficiency, innovation, inclusiveness and visibility in the international arena.

The objectives of the Task Force are to:

(i) act as a catalyst to foster the use of ICT to promote development and combat poverty ;

(ii)   act as a strategy advisor to the United Nations Secretary-General on the use of ICT in advancing the Millennium Development Goals;

(iii)   advocate maintaining of ICT-for-development as high as possible on the development agenda of the United Nations system;

(iv)   strengthen synergies and coordination among United Nations agencies;

(v)   serve as a policy forum, a global think-tank and an information exchange point on ICT-for-development issues, help identify and promote creative ways of mainstreaming ICT in development programmes;

(vi)   facilitate and support coordination and cooperation among the various stakeholders operating in the ICT-for-development community;

(vii)   promote broad awareness of the potential of ICT for advancing development, facilitate sharing of experiences and lessons learned, support replicating and scaling-up of best practices;

(viii) serve as a forum for building broad global partnerships among government, private sector and civil society institutions; and

(ix)   explore and facilitate innovative funding arrangements for key "ICT-for-development" initiatives.

The Task Force believes that harnessing the potential of the ICT revolution for development for all for the reduction of poverty and for the empowerment of those who are currently marginalized is a monumental challenge. The speed of global technological and economic transformation demands substantive and urgent action on a global scale to transform the digital divide into the digital opportunity for all of humanity.

5.   OUR ORGANIZATION

In order to implement its Plan of Action and to help stakeholders to share best practices and lessons learned in ICT, the Task Force created six Working Groups for collaborative action. They are:

1) ICT Policy and Governance
2) National and Regional e-Strategies
3) Human Resources Development and Capacity Building
4) Resource Mobilization
5) Low Cost Connectivity and Access and
6) Business Enterprise and Entrepreneurship

Additionally, several Regional Nodes were created to implement some of the basic principles of the *modus operandi* of the Task Force, such as decentralization of the activities, an open and inclusive approach, and reliance on existing mechanisms. Those already established are:

1) Africa
2) Asia
3) Latin America and the Caribbean
4) Arab States and
5) Europe and Central Asia